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ABSTRACT

The choice of a reliable authority for use in decisions of grammatical acceptability in English is discussed. It is argued that commonly-heard "rules" of English grammar offer advice that is either prescriptive or proscriptive, not descriptive, and often based on inaccuracies or flawed linguistic analyses. This is illustrated in the case of adverbs with the suffix "-ly." Arguments for use of such rules include the prediction that without them, in the long term, the language will suffer. Controversy over the use of dictionaries for grammatical information is traced to the introduction in 1961 of a revised version of a respected dictionary, which included language commonly used but not adhering closely to accepted rules. The further evolution of American English dictionaries, and controversy surrounding their design and content, is chronicled briefly. It is proposed that the only two sources of reliable advice on points raised in prescriptive grammar are the traditional dictionaries and Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage, which provides analytic accounts of each grammatical issue, recounts the history of the dispute, surveys prescriptivist opinion, and describes current practice, with quotations and examples. However, it is also argued that ultimately, individuals must be their own authorities on language standards. (MSE)

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Language Authority in America: In Grammar and Webster We Trust

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Every society struggles with the issue of "good language"—what constitutes the standard by which people can model their speech and writing and judge that of others. Some countries have established official bodies, such as an academy or a government agency, to provide guidance through pronouncements and publications. In the United States we have not followed this route, but have instead evolved something of a free-market academy. It operates through two highly competitive segments of the publishing industry. One of them produces monolingual English dictionaries, many of which have *Webster* in their titles. The other publishes the numerous books, articles, and columns dealing with points of usage, that is, the sorts of things that many people refer to with the term *grammar*.

As you might expect, the process of setting standards for language use does not always go smoothly. In my talk today I would like to examine the controversy surrounding language authority in America. However, a disclaimer. I am not a disinterested observer. People like me—ones with some training in linguistics—have been in the thick of the controversy—in fact have often been the focus of it. We are accused of being "permissivists," of preaching a philosophy of "anything goes," of believing that there are no standards. Such charges arise especially from the perception that linguists are out to undermine two of the traditional bases of authority in English usage: grammar and the dictionary. First grammar.

In linguistics, the term *grammar* has two important, but distinct meanings. One sense is illustrated by its use in such sentences as the following: "English grammar relies more heavily on word order than on inflectional endings" or "The grammar of Yupik Eskimo has been influenced by contact with English." That is, the term *grammar* here means the abstract system underlying the language, the set of organizing principles which native speakers follow intuitively. You can't see this grammar and it's not open to introspection. All that you can observe are the utterances created according to its principles.

That is what linguists specializing in grammar do. They examine the speech and writing of people who have the grammar in their heads to try to infer

what the categories and organizing principles must be. Such an attempt to explain the grammar of a language—*grammar* in sense number one—is also called *grammar*. It is a theory of the structure, a description, a consciously constructed artifact. Depending on the assumptions of the grammarian and the purpose for the description, the grammar might be presented discursively, using terms such as *noun, verb, clause,* etc. Or it might be cast in code-like formulas of the sort that current linguistics is famous—or notorious—for. Sentences such as the following illustrate this second meaning of *grammar*: "Houghton Mifflin has just published a new grammar of English" or "His grammar of English doesn't account for even the most basic patterns."

However, for most Americans, the term *grammar* means something quite different. This meaning is illustrated in such a statement as the following:

> "I'm very weak in grammar. I can never keep straight *different from* and *different than* or *between* and *among* or *disinterested* and *uninterested.*"

That is, *grammar* in this third sense refers to that hazily perceived collection of rules which, if followed, supposedly allow us to use English "correctly." Examples of such rules are

> "Don't use *like* as a conjunction."
> "Don't use *contact* as a verb."
> "Don't use *infer* with the meaning 'to hint, suggest'."
> "Don't use the verb *finalize.*"
> "Don't use the noun *data* with a singular verb."
> "Don't split infinitives."

As this representative sample demonstrates, such statements are not descriptive; they don't explain patterns in the language. Rather, they are exhortations sometimes collectively referred to as "prescriptive grammar." But in fact they are overwhelmingly PROscriptive, that is, warnings setting forth what NOT to do. And even though in present-day English they can't be phrased "Thou shalt not . . .," they still have the force of commandment for many Americans who wish to avoid linguistic sin.

Now to a linguist as grammarian such pronouncements aren't very interesting or relevant. But to a linguist as applied linguist—that is, someone trying to use linguistic principles and information in practical situations—these kinds of doctrinaire precepts can be very frustrating. For one thing, the arguments used to justify a rule are often bad, relying for example on faulty syntactic analysis or mistaken historical background or irrelevant analogy, to

name the most common problems. Secondly, many of these rules bear little relation to what successful language users are actually doing. Perhaps most frustrating is the doomsday rhetoric that these rules often come packaged in, the ominous, guilt-inducing predictions that unless we stop violating this or that or some set of rules, the language will rot and communication in it will be impossible.

Let me illustrate by looking closely at one particular rule, that condemning the use of *hopefully* as a sentence modifier. Examples of sentences containing this alleged error are the following:

"Hopefully, it will stop raining soon."

"Hopefully, the budget cuts will stimulate confidence in the U.S. economy."

The syntactic argument against this use of *hopefully* is as follows. Because the *-ly* suffix creates adverbs of manner from adjectives (e.g., *sad-sadly, frequent-frequently*), all adverbs thus derived should remain adverbs of manner—that is, should modify a specific verb or verb phrase. So for example,

"She looked forward hopefully to the future."

According to one prescriptive grammarian, "What *hopefully* refuses to convey . . . is the desirability of the hoped-for event." Such a sentence modifier is a "dangling adverb" which "strains the sense of *-ly* to the breaking point." It is "unidiomatic."

However this reasoning is simply wrong. English has a well-established construction in which *-ly* adverbs convey the speaker's or writer's orientation. In one sub-type the adverb signals the speaker-writer's rhetorical stance to what is being said. For example,

"Frankly, I'm tired of this job."

"Seriously, what shall we do?"

"Honestly, I feel like we should agree now to his proposal."

In the much larger subtype—the one to which *hopefully* belongs—the sentence adverbial gives the speaker's or writer's evaluation of the content of the sentence itself: for example,

"Luckily, the river crested one foot below flood stage."

"This novel is, arguably, the best one ever written about Madison County."

Other such sentence adverbs are *certainly, definitely, obviously, possibly, supposedly, foolishly, wisely, remarkably, amazingly, regrettably, (more) importantly, curiously,*

undoubtedly, ironically, happily, sadly, fortunately, etc. Historically, these sentence-modifying adverbs developed from ordinary adverbs of manner, and many still are able to fill either role. For example,

manner adverb: "He spoke truthfully about his experience."

sentence adverb: "Truthfully, this is the high point of my life."

This is exactly the situation with *hopefully.* Until fairly recently, at least as far as written evidence shows, *hopefully* was used only as a manner adverb. Then in this century it began following the well-greased path—one many centuries old, probably of common Germanic origin—of manner adverbs becoming also sentence modifiers. Thus, in both its syntax and its history, *hopefully* is absolutely regular and ordinary.

Linguists have not been hesitant to point out similar technical problems with other prescriptive rules, especially their historical and syntactic deficiencies. Much of the controversy has focused on such details. However, important as these matters might be to the validity of the rules, on another level they are really beside the point. The force of a rule doesn't depend on the soundness of its conventional justification. For example, people don't avoid the double negative out of fear of being misunderstood to mean the positive. That argument is also weak—in fact silly. People avoid the double negative because it is socially stigmatized. Reputable speakers and writers shun it. When it is used, educated readers and listeners notice it with extreme disfavor, and that negative feedback reinforces its taboo status.

However, this is not the case with sentence-modifying *hopefully.* It is used widely and often by people of impeccable social standing and educational credentials, and used in even the most formal contexts. It almost never draws negative attention to itself. In other words, the proscription against the double negative is a real rule; it has social force behind it. However, the proscription against sentence-modifying *hopefully* is a nonrule. Nobody much cares.

Well, of course, that's not quite true, is it. Some people **DO** care, **DO** object to sentence modifying *hopefully,* **DO** insist that relative pronouns *which* and *that* be distinguished, that *infer* should not be used to mean *imply,* that *due to* must be used only as a predicate adjective, that *nuclear* can never be acceptably pronounced /nuk yə lər/, that *and* should never begin a sentence, that *like* should never be used as a conjunction, and so on through dozens such rules which are widely ignored, but which some people insist are valid and collectively important.

It is in this stubborn defense of rules that we see the crux of the dispute about standards. Linguists argue that language standards flow from language use; that is, the standards reflect what reputable speakers and writers are choosing when they communicate successfully. However, the advocates of a code of grammatical correctness insist that standards are absolute, not relative, that a usage which has been proclaimed to be bad does not become acceptable just because large numbers of people ignore the rule. Here, for example is what one prescriptive guidebook says about the use of *like* as a conjunction, as in

"He played bridge like he did everything else—extremely well."

"It seems like this rain will never stop."

And now I quote this as yet unnamed authority:

> The use of *like* for *as* [and for *as if*] has its defenders; they argue that any usage that achieves currency becomes valid automatically. This, they say, is the way the language is formed. It is and it isn't. An expression sometimes merely enjoys a vogue, much as an article of apparel does. *Like* has long been widely misused by the illiterate; lately it has been taken up by the knowing and the well-informed, who find it catchy, or liberating, and who use it as though they were slumming. If every word or device that achieved currency were immediately authenticated, simply on the ground of popularity, the language would be as chaotic as a ball game with no foul lines.

Or here is how the source I quoted earlier on *hopefully* continues:

> The special badness of *hopefully* is . . . that it appeals to speakers and writers who do not think about what they are saying and pick up vogue words by reflex action. This peculiar charm of *hopefully* accounts for its tiresome frequency. How readily the rotten apple will corrupt the barrel is seen in the similar use of transferred meaning in other adverbs denoting an attitude of mind.

This, then, is the high moral purpose which prescriptivists offer for their staunch defense of rules, even ones which are lost causes. Without these rules, they say, the language rots and chaos threatens. Literally. This is not, for them, rhetorical exaggeration. Over and over again in deadly earnest they invoke the specter of a language corrupted and communication in it threatened. The death of English is foreseen as a distinct possibility.

Now lest you think that I have chosen extreme formulations or taken from unrepresentative sources, let me give you this background. The statement about

like is from the third edition of *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White. It is a little book which has achieved almost scriptural authority for large numbers of people since White revised it for publication from a much earlier manuscript by Strunk, who was White's Cornell University English professor. My source for the *hopefully* statement is *Modern American Usage* by Wilson Follett, but completed after his death by Jacques Barzun, with the assistance of such literary luminaries as Lionel Trilling, Carlos Baker, and Dudley Fitts. Both books are still in print and on sale in better bookstores.

In turning now to the second source of language authority in American—the dictionary—I am not abandoning grammar. For many of the same issues and same antagonists are involved. However, in the recent controversies surrounding American dictionaries, the points of contention go beyond the limited set of traditional prescriptive grammar rules to include all areas of language variation and language change. And as a result of the very public negative reception given to several recent American dictionaries have received, many more people have become aware of and alarmed by the supposedly permissive approach to language authority.

Here, for example, is how a June 29, 1993, editorial in the *Des Moines Register* greeted the new tenth edition of *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*:

> . . . When anything goes, language and thus the thought process that depends upon it are eroded to mush. When phony words and outrageous pronunciations are acceptable, the beauty of the words of a Francis Bacon or a William Shakespeare are corrupted until they carry all the rhetorical impact of Donald Duck.
>
> Not only can it happen, it is happening—with the knowledge and acquiescence of those to whom we look for preservation of linguistic discipline. . . . Merriam-Webster, which publishes the M-W Collegiate Dictionary [sic], goes with the flow—right down the sewer, whence arise words like ditz and wifty, both of which have been granted the sanctity of inclusion in M-W's version.
>
> If ever a single example of aiding and abetting the degrading of English were sufficient foundation for indictment, Merriam-Webster provides it with its listing (in its 10th edition) of "nyu-ky-ler" as an alternative pronunciation for nuclear. . . .
>
> But "nyu-ky-ler" is how the word is spoken, even by some educated speakers, M-W wails weakly. In that case, look in the near future for

> acceptance of "ee-wee" for ewe, and "Idaho" for Iowa. Educated speakers—"educated" beyond their ability to learn—say them all the time.
>
> . . .
>
> Today, nyu-ky-ler; tomorrow Dez Moneys. For shame, Merriam-Webster.

As Dave Barry often has to plead when he quotes from real life, "I'm not making this up!" In fact, the editorial reflects what has become the conventional wisdom about most current American dictionaries: that is, that they have betrayed a sacred trust to uphold strict standards for correctness and purity, a responsibility symbolized by the very name which many of them carry in their title: *Webster*. The fervent belief is that only approved words, meanings, usages, pronunciations, and spellings should be entered, except that occasionally a common but erroneous one may appear in order to be firmly condemned. However, it is widely believed that our dictionaries are failing to meet this standard.

This loss of confidence can be precisely dated. It occurred in 1961 with the publication of *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language,* the large unabridged volume that you find even today scattered about libraries and in reference sections. The *Third* was a complete revision of the 1934 second edition, but in most important respects it represented a continuation of principles followed in the making of that work. The fundamental principle—one which became firmly established in nineteenth-century lexicography, especially through the example of the *Oxford English Dictionary,* is that dictionary entries are based on evidence collected from actual use. Reputable dictionary makers systematically and continuously sample a wide range of current written and spoken English, copying down usages in context. These "citations," as they are called, accumulate in the publishers files—nowadays electronic files—and they become the basis for selecting words and defining them, for determining pronunciations and spellings, and for deciding to apply restrictive labels such as "slang," "informal," "nonstandard," etc. By the time the editors compiled the *Third International,* they had some ten million citation slips at their disposal, evidence collected over many decades, including over four million gathered since 1934.

Yet the chorus of outrage which greeted *Webster's Third* was immediate, widespread, and sustained. In an influential review in the *Atlantic Monthly,* Wilson Follett called it "sabotage" of the language. Other middle-brow

magazines such as the *New Yorker* and *Saturday Review* condemned it. Leading newspapers, including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, railed against it in editorials. And even smaller papers, such as the *Mason City Globe Gazette*, the daily serving the north Iowa farm area where I was living, took up the cause. Scholarly publications such as *Science* and the *American Scholar* took editorial positions against it. It was, in the words of one critic, a "fighting document," and many people joined the fray.

This thirty-year-old battle over *Webster's Third* would be only an interesting footnote in our cultural history except for the fact that its legacy is still with us. For one thing, the controversy strengthened further the belief that dictionaries embody a true version—or at least a purified version—of the language, so overwhelming was the testimony to this faith. Most Americans still hold it. Second, and conversely, the war over the *Third* fostered a widespread suspicion about the aims and methods of American dictionary makers. With one exception, which I will explain in a moment, major dictionaries published since 1961 have been greeted with similar, though less intense, criticism that they are too permissive. Witness the *Des Moines Register* response which I quoted.

Third, the controversy was a public relations disaster for the field of linguistics, creating a negative stereotype which persists even today. Already notorious for questioning the accuracy and worth of traditional prescriptive grammar, the young discipline was quickly identified by critics as the corrupting influence behind *Webster's Third.* This in spite of the fact that, except in the treatment of pronunciation and regional dialects, structural linguistics had very little influence on the work at all. But some early promotional materials from the company's advertising department played up this new, modern, "scientific" approach to language, and the editor-in-chief (Phillip Gove) was caught agreeing with such structuralist tenets as that speech is primary and writing secondary and derivative and that usage is relative. Add to these the fact that many linguists sprang to the defense of the *Third*—on the basis of its generally sound lexicography—and linguistics became firmly identified as the false doctrine on which the work was based.

A final legacy of the *Webster's Third* controversy is the *American Heritage Dictionary*, a completely new dictionary which appeared in 1969. James Parton, publisher of *American Heritage* magazine, was so incensed by the *Third* that he tried to buy the company with the intention of withdrawing the *Third* from the market and redoing it as a purified fourth edition. Failing in that takeover, he

decided to start from scratch to create the sort of prescriptive dictionary that he and other critics had wanted. What emerged—ultimately under the umbrella of Houghton-Mifflin—was a much better dictionary than might have been expected, given its reactionary doctrinaire origins. The *American Heritage* had many striking design features, including photographic illustrations and a visually appealing, easy-to-read format. But its most noteworthy quality was its authoritarian approach to standards. In contrast to *Webster's Third*, the *American Heritage* freely applied restrictive labels such as "slang" and "colloquial." But the prime manifestation of its prescriptivism was the usage notes appended to several hundred entries representing most of the points of prescriptive grammar. In part these notes were based on opinions solicited from a usage panel comprised of 104 prominent writers, critics, editors, journalists, academics, and other professionals, many of whom were avowed purists and detractors of *Webster's Third*. The panelists were asked to approve or disapprove suspect usages about which they were queried. Percentages based on their responses were regularly quoted in the usage notes. For example, 90% found *finalize* unacceptable; 66% would not approve *contact* as a verb.

The *American Heritage* was warmly received by reviewers and cleverly promoted in advertising. It was a commercial success and continues so today, having just appeared in a revised third edition in 1992. The significance of the *American Heritage* for language authority in America is two-fold. First, it has satisfied the yearning of many dictionary users for a more prescriptive reference, one giving special importance to the opinions of a linguistically conservative elite. More importantly, its success in the academy of the marketplace has forced the other major American dictionary makers to tack somewhat in the same direction. Random House, World, and Merriam-Webster now all include usage notes explaining the particular objections that have been raised and reporting the editors' assessments of what actual usage is. All three now also make more use of restrictive labels, though Merriam-Webster has steadfastly refused to adopt a label such as "informal" or "colloquial" to indicate that a word is most common in informal, often conversational contexts.

What then is the current state of language authority in our academy of the marketplace? Let me answer by considering both sides: demand and supply. The demand side is very discouraging, not because of low demand but because of the low quality of the demand. With respect to dictionaries, far too many people assume that the name "Webster" in a title guarantees a good dictionary—indeed

signifies THE dictionary, whereas in fact any fly-by-night company can reprint an out-of-date dog and peddle it as "Webster's dictionary." And they do, and people buy them, for example, from Publisher's Clearinghouse or at special promotions in bookstores. Furthermore, far too many people are satisfied with simply consulting one dictionary or with relying on a fifteen- or twenty-five-year-old edition. And, most fundamentally, probably the great majority of users still expect the dictionary to dictate a true form of the language free of all error—that is, see the dictionary as authoritarian rather than authoritative.

Yet in spite of this generally low quality demand, the market has supplied us with some excellent dictionaries. Five publishers—Webster's New World, Random House, American Heritage, Merriam-Webster, and World Book—maintain ongoing editorial operations which regularly bring out new editions, providing us with up-to-date information about our language. I include in this even the *American Heritage*, which in its most recent edition has a much more realistic approach to questions of disputed usage. The one glaring gap in our supply of good American dictionaries is the absence of a new edition of the Merriam-Webster unabridged. It has been over thirty years now since *Webster's Third* appeared, and it badly needs complete revision. Although the company regularly publishes updating supplements, these are seldom found in the vicinity of the *Third*. It is true that in 1987 Random House published a new edition of its "unabridged." But while it is an excellent work which I highly recommend, it is not nearly as comprehensive as *Webster's Third*, and can't really serve as a substitute for it.

As to "grammar," the demand continues to reflect our almost pathological insecurity about using the language—not insecurity caused by the actual difficulty of thinking clearly and shaping language effectively, but insecurity engendered simply by fear of making mistakes. Feeding this anxiety is a continuing stream of articles, books, and interviews ridiculing our use of language and lamenting, as does Edwin Newman in his best-seller *Strictly Speaking*, that Americans are likely to be the death of English. What is the evidence? Endless examples of bloated diction and clumsy syntax, and—surprise!—*hopefully* as a sentence modifier, *like* as a conjunction, *disinterested* for *uninterested*, etc.

So the market demands "grammar" and "grammar" it gets, in dozens, ranging from old war horses like H. W. Fowler, Wilson Follett, and Strunk and White to newcomers with inspirational titles like *Diseased English* or ones which

promise entertainment with the medicine, such as *The Transitive Vampire: The Ultimate Handbook for the Innocent, the Eager, and the Doomed* (Carolyn Gordon). And this is to say nothing of the "glossaries of usage" incorporated in countless textbooks and handbooks. Unfortunately, as I have already indicated, much of the advice is about nonissues, and much of the advice is badly justified and out of touch with reality.

To my mind today's market provides only two sources of reliable advice on points raised in prescriptive grammar, sources which consider both opinion AND facts about usage and which explain the issues accurately. One source is the dictionaries which I have just mentioned. All now contain usage notes covering virtually every issue raised in prescriptive grammars and do so more conveniently and reliably than almost any handbook or glossary. However, for someone wanting a freestanding, more detailed guide, I enthusiastically recommend the *Dictionary of English Usage* published by Merriam-Webster in 1989. It presents carefully analytic explanations of each issue, recounts the history of the dispute, surveys opinion of the prescriptivists, and describes current practice, all with numerous quotations and examples. It is the definitive reference. Anyone seriously involved in writing or editing should have ready access to this excellent work.

Let me close by indicating briefly what I would consider a linguistically sound and functionally effective approach to language authority. I can capture it by giving a twist to the "anything goes" charge frequently leveled against linguistics. It's not true that "anything goes" in language use. But it is true that "anything goes that goes." That is, the real source of authority in language use is language use itself. Which is just another way of acknowledging the fundamental fact that language is embedded in society. In the smithy of social interaction we are constantly struggling with and working out what is "good"—what is "correct—and what is "wrong"—what is "bad"—language. It's an elusive process having very little to do with logic or truth or beauty or historical precedent and quite a lot to do with power and fashion. And it never gets settled. In other words, it's exactly like any other social process.

Now to my mind this realization is liberating, although into a new and more challenging responsibility. For one thing, it weakens the tyranny of the mistake, the tongue-tying fear that English consists largely of subtle traps which can be avoided only by mastering arcane rules. At the other extreme it takes away the false security of transcendental correctness, the often smug confidence

that one finite set of precepts will fit all situations. Most important, a realization of the social basis of language authority forces us to engage the language directly and personally, to see it not as a distant abstraction, but as an integral and natural part of our daily existence. It's true that we can get helpful guidance from descriptive dictionaries and grammars. But given the variety of contexts in which we communicate, given the diversity of usages and the divided attitudes toward them, and given constant change in our language and society, ultimately we have to be our own authorities on language standards. To me that's not "permissive." That's just common sense.